Contra Costa County Historical Society

BULLETIN

POST OFFICE BOX 190 MAY 15, 1975 MARTINEZ, CALIFORNIA

June Meeting: Eugene O'Neill and his Tao House

Tao House, Eugene O'Neill's home in the Las Trampas hills west of Danville, where he wrote such memorable plays as "The Iceman Cometh" and "Long Day's Journey Into Night." The home and surrounding acreage is a showplace of beauty which the Eugene O'Neill Foundation hopes to preserve in public ownership.

The saga of Eugene O'Neill and Tao House, which he left behind in Danville, will be related to Society members at a dinner meeting, June 5th, at the Red Rooster Restaurant in Walnut Creek. In words and pictures the Eugene O'Neill Foundation will present a program on the life and brief sojourn in San Ramon Valley of the renown, often controversial, playwright whose works are classics in the American theater.

Sally Ewing of Diablo, a member of the foundation's board of directors will speak on O'Neill's local residence in the mid-1930s and the significance of his home to Contra Costa. Her talk will be illustrated by color slides.

Jere Hageman, of Lafayette will display his valuable collection of photographs of Eugene and Carlotta O'Neill.

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born in 1888 in New York, the third son of James and Ellen O'Neill, she a Cleveland girl and he an Irishman who came to America as a lad of 10 to work in a machine shop 12 hours a day. According to legend, James became an actor by chance. A theater director called him from a saloon next door to be a "super", or an "extra", on the stage with the great Civil War-era performer, Edwin Forrest. In later years he acquired a measure of fame on the stage which enabled him to place young Eugene in a private school at Hudson, New York, operated by austere, "black-robed women" (nuns).

Carlotta and Eugene O'Neill, in photo taken at Tao House about 1938.

that they could have an unfettered life in the theater while the boy learned his reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic. The abandonment among strange children and alien adults left its mark. Eugene was filled with the anguish of loneliness and a sense of cruel rejection, especially when he had to stay at school during vacations when other children went home.

As an adolescent, rejection erupted into rebellion against his actor-father whom he blamed for his banishment from the love and care of his mother. At Harvard, he began to experiment with acting and writing — and drinking — and continued his revolt against his father. In 1910. Eugene signed as a deckhand on a sailing ship at Mystic, Connecticut, and went to South America, where he bummed around ports in Brazil and Honduras.

Back home, his first success in playwriting was "Bound East for Cardiff," staged in Provincetown and hailed as a realistic presentation of a sailor's life. The author himself took the part of a salty mate.

His subsequent plays were said to have been penned out of the profound love of a man for his mother — "The Great God Brown," "Desire Under the Elms," "The Strange Interlude," "Dynamo," and "Mourning Becomes Electra."

By 1936, now widely acknowledged a leading playwright, O'Neill won the Nobel Prize in American literature.

Carlotta Monterey, his third wife, shared Tao House. his home in Danville, on the edge of what is today Las Trampas Regional Park. She is described by one of O'Neill's biographers as "a woman strikingly like his mother . . . who could envelop him in the protective love he had felt about him when he was a little boy."

It was an environment in which he thrived, if only for a few brief years, and penned some of his most notable work.

By the mid-1940s he was living back east again. He died in 1953.

GUEST SPEAKER

Sally Ewing is a third generation Californian, educated at the University of California at Berkeley, where she majored in history. She resides in Diablo, the old Railroad Ranch of bygone years, with her physician-husband and three children.

Mrs. Ewing taught elementary, junior high and high school for eight years. Her interest in Playwright O'Neill developed from reading his "Long Day's Journey Into Night," after it was published in 1956.

She serves as a director of the Eugene O'Neill Foundation which is attempting to preserve Tao House in public ownership.

Jere Hageman, whose collection of photos of the O'Neill home in Danville will be on display for Society members' inspection.

TAO HOUSE - COUNTY SHRINE?

An assessment by a conservationist

THALIA BREWER

Two miles west of Danville in the peace and beauty of Las Trampas Wilderness is one of the most significant homes in world literature. This is Tao House, built in 1937 by America's greatest playwright, Eugene O'Neill. At Tao House O'Neill wrote some of his greatest plays: "The Iceman Cometh," "Hughie," "A Touch of the Poet," "A Moon for the Misbegotten," and the autobiographical masterpiece "Long Day's Journey Into Night."

The significance of Tao House was recognized in 1971 when it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places which is "the official schedule of the nation's cultural property that is worth saving . . . it is a protective inventory of irreplaceable resources across the face of the land . . . it is a guide to a richer environment with visible continuity in the past." Following its placement on the register, Tao House was designated a United States Landmark.

Each year many Americans travel abroad and seek out historic homes where creative geniuses have lived and worked. It is not necessary to travel that far. The San Ramon Valley has a home as significant as the homes of Shakespeare and Shaw. What shall we do about it? We have a responsibility to preserve Tao House for ourselves and for future generations.

Eugene O'Neill on the porch of Tao House.

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MEMBERSHIP MEETING

DINNER & PROGRAM

Speaker: Sally Ewing, member board of directors, Eugene O'Neill Foundation

Date: June 5, 1975

Place: Red Rooster Restaurant
2995 Ygnacio Valley Blvd.
Walnut Creek

Time: 7:00 p.m., no-host cocktails
7:30 p.m., dinner, $6.50

Reservations: To J. B. Jory, Sect'y
P.O. Box 190
Martinez, CA 94553

COME ONE! COME ALL!